DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 535 CS 216 008

AUTHOR	Ryan, Patrick
TITLE	Elements of Style and an Advanced ESL Student: The Case of Jun Shan Zhang.
PUB DATE	1995-09-28
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the International Writing Conference (2nd, St. Louis, MO, September 27-30, 1995).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; *English for Special Purposes; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Research; Writing Skills; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS	Chinese People; *Stylistics; University of Iowa

ABSTRACT

Despite educators' efforts to understand the process of composition, writing remains a mercurial process difficult to see or describe, even partially. Writing is a process even more difficult to grasp when the writer is possessed of a language--Chinese, for example--and must rely on that language to take possession of and write in a second language, English. Writing teachers have found that attention to invention, organization, development, and other more global aspects of the writing process helps writers better express themselves in their own voices--whereas a narrow focus on editing and sentence revision often constrains or stifles writers. Jun Shan Zhang came from China to the University of Iowa's writing center highly motivated to write better English, because he hoped to pursue an international career researching and publishing articles on Paleolithic hunters in Asia, America, and Europe. As an anthropologist developing his professional style, Jun Shan offers important insight into the question of the relative value of voice versus specific purpose. After study at the writing center, Jun Shan exhibited increased mastery of subordination and coordination as well as a remarkable ease with participial phrases, a stylistic device somewhat difficult for Asian language students to master. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 412 535

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P. Ryan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Patrick Ryan
University of Iowa
September 28, 1995

Elements of Style and an Advanced ESL Student: The Case of Jun Shan Zhang

Despite our efforts to understand the process of composition, writing remains a mercurial process difficult to see or describe, even partially, a process even more difficult to grasp when the writer is possessed of a language--Chinese, for example--and must rely on that language to take possession of and write in a second language, English. In my brief paper, I attempt to illustrate how an Advanced ESL writer works toward "finishing" his study of English by learning about elementary devices of prose style. Jun Shan Zhang, a Chinese doctoral student of archaeological anthropology, develops his style by studying English syntax directly. During three semesters of work in Iowa's Writing Lab, with some individualized teaching, my friend and student Jun Shan began or continued mastery of rudimentary syntactic structures comprising elements of English style. That is, studying and writing week after week, he incorporated into his English prose "new" patterns of subordination and coordination, prepositional phrases and infinitives, appositives and participial phrases, elements of style that native speakers master largely in their acquisition of oral language.

Such study of basic syntactic elements has been questioned as counterproductive because we writing teachers have found that attention to invention, organization, development, and other more global aspects of the writing process helps writers better express

CS216008

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

themselves in their own voices whereas a narrow focus on editing and sentence revision often constrains or stifles writers. So in describing Jun Shan's study of elemental English syntax to improve his style, I should not only give good reasons for having helped him with this, his major goal as a writer, but I should also describe how he studied and to what degree his study of English syntax improved his style.

Jun Shan came to Iowa's writing center highly motivated to write better English because as a Chinese archaeological anthropologist of Paleolithic human culture, he hopes to pursue an international career researching and publishing articles on Paleolithic hunters in Asia, America, and Europe. In fact, after working as a Paleolithic archaeologist in China, he has contributed to the University of Iowa Department of Anthropology with his expertise on computer plotting of digs and with his links to Chinese archaeologists.

Jun Shan earned a bachelor's degree from Shanxiu University in 1986 and began working in his profession at the Shanxiu Archaeological Research Institute for several years prior to enrolling at the University of Iowa. He reads English books and articles about anthropology almost as well as Chinese books. He composes and organizes his writing quite well. He enrolled in our Writing Lab because he wanted "to write English better." Specifically, he wants to compose clear, forceful scholarly presentations and articles on his archaeological research.

During his first fifty minutes with me, I invited Jun Shan to write in response to our first invitation, a warm-up invitation

urging student to "Talk on Paper." I should note that this excerpt is unedited by either Jun Shan or me:

> I came from China. My hometown, Taiyuan City, is located in the northwest of China and it is medium size city which population approximately is 2,800,000. Its latitude is very close to that of Iowa. Also the climate of Mountain City is similar with that of Iowa. There are many mountains on east and west of the city, and it was in the river basin of Fenhe, which is a branch of Huanhe River. A lot of coal mines are discovered around the city, so Taiyuan city is a mining and chemistry industrial city. Air pollution is a big problem there.

fall '93

As "Talking on Paper," this excerpt probably reveals more about Jun Shan's speaking voice than his writing style, so in order to evaluate his stylistic strengths and limitations, I asked him to bring me something that he had written and revised recently. Reading an excerpt from Jun Shan's ten-page report (below) on a field trip for his graduate seminar in Archaeological Method and Theory, we must remember that we writing teachers help ESL students develop their personal voices rather than restricting our teaching to specific utilitarian purposes.

As an anthropologist developing his professional style, Jun Shan offers important insight into the question of the relative value of voice versus specific purpose. As you read his academic paper, note that his personal voice animates his academic style and that Jun Shan's "special purpose" to develop his English style may be understood as a desire to develop his effective voice.

This is a nice and comfortable afternoon. Comfortable sunshine, green grasses, and singing birds made me realize that the spring has finally come. I took out my camera and focused on the portico of the Museum of Natural History. No sooner had I shot than I found something wrong. I noticed an old and ugly tree in my screen which I did not want to include in such a gorgeous spring scene. It was strange the tree stands there apparently, but I failed to see it in the first place. Anyway it was already 3 o'clock and it was time for us to tour the Museum of Natural History.

This museum was established in 1858, which is composed of four areas including ground floor corridor, bird hall, mammal hall, and Iowa gallery. Today we six students were going to visit only Iowa hall. Our tour was guided by a short and middle aged man, his name was Philip. . . . I noticed his face was covered with confusions and alertness.

from "A Visit to the Museum of Natural History" 4/93

When I first read Jun Shan's report, I did not understand at all the significance of the anecdotal, and metaphorical, frame. He brings a camera, a tool for recording the scenes he will see. In a detail that seems irrelevant, he mentions that he did not notice an ugly, old tree until he shot a picture of its environs. The professional archaeologist hereby employs metaphor, a poetic means, to remind us of an important aspect of empirical observation, that until we record experience, we do not see it fully.

Jun Shan then begins his "thick description" of the Museum tour, including the spring weather and the short, middle-aged docent, his face covered with "confusions and alertness." Jun Shan implies, I think, that ethnographic descriptions remain subjective and must be captured in language, and so his eagerness to develop a richer style emerges from the center of his academic and intellectual development. To be a good archaeological anthropologist, he must master a rich prose style.

To assess strengths and limitations of Jun Shan's style, we looked at several of his pieces and analyzed them according to principles of sentence revision delineated in several works on English style, books such as Richard Lanham's Revising Prose and Joseph William's Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace. Jun Shan had been using a lot of "be verbs" and simple sentences. He wrote the following in response to an invitation to introduce himself:

> This is a kind of introduction of myself. My name is Jun Shan Zhang, Jun Shan is my first name. I also have English name which is called Jackson or Jack. One of my friends told me my English name is not good for me . . . . But more friends of mine think Jack is a pretty good name and it is very manly. *10-93*

After assessing Jun Shan's style, we engaged his reading more directly in development of his writing ability. I asked him to bring me copies of two articles, one from a prestigious journal in anthropology and a second article by an anthropoligist whose work he enjoys reading. Below is an excerpt from an article by his favorite anthropologist:

> An old Eskimo man was asked how he would summarize his life; he thought for a moment and said, "Willow smoke and dogs' tails; when we camp it's all willow smoke, and when we move it's all dogs' tails wagging in front of you. Eskimo life is half of each." This man was capturing in a few words a way of life now largely vanished from man's experience: mobile man pursuing food, shelter, and satisfaction in different places in his environment.

This excerpt illustrates Jack's appreciation for good ethnographic writing and the great gap between his reading and writing ability. Frustrated when he wrote anthropological research, he often relied on close paraphrase of sources tediously woven into a personal synthesis but lacking his personal voice.

For the ethnographer capturing significant detail within a web of action, style becomes closely related to fluency, organization, and development. With a pad and pencil, the ethnographer writes as he sits, watches, and listens. Jun Shan would develop a syntactic repertoire that allows him to "catch" significant details and render them in a style that best weaves those details into a verbal record of culturally significant events.

To develop a more mature style he began an ambitious, individualized program of study. Using Morenberger, Kerek, and Dyker's Writer's Options over the course of a year, Jun Shan first studied subordination and coordination, then the appositive, then the relative clause, then the infinitive and participial phrase, always in the context of revising his own prose, both personal and

academic. At appropriate points in his drafts, I would ask, "Can you use subordination here?" or other questions prompting him to reexamine his stylistic options. With varying degrees of my help, he revised, revised, revised. Some of the most fruitful learning time, I think, was between semesters when we didn't even meet. Without classes, Jun Shan had time to reread Writer's Options, ruminate, and reconsider some of the choices he'd made in revision.

> After two semesters' study in the writting lab, I feel a lot of progress on my English Writting. Before I attended the lab, writting paper or giving written presentation is a very scary and painful thing to do or think about. Now writting paper is still not something fun to do, but I became feeling much comfortable and self-confident about myself. I benefit from this wonderful writting program, so I want to keep coming back.

The above impromptu exhibits Jun Shan's increased mastery of subordination and coordination as well as a remarkable ease with participial phrases, a stylistic device somewhat difficult for Asian language students to master. Increased facility with such stylistic devices also helps Jun Shan with analytical writing such as his immediate response, below, to an article that he read about personality types:

> After reading the article "To Find Self, Take a Number", I was eager to figure out my type among the nine types of people. However, I could not decide which type I belong

to even after three rounds of careful selecting. It seems as if I belong to anyone of them, but on my second look, I feel that I do not belong to any one of them.

This impromptu response shows how well Jun Shan has internalized various syntactic elements of English prose after three years' of consistent study, dialogue, and revision of his work. Comparison to his first impromptu essay shows growth in his ability to write a fluid first draft, an important function of cultural anthropology. And finally, throughout his writing, Jun Shan, conscious of the personal, subjective dimension of social scientific writing, has kept his personal voice.